

Sati in the Ancient Tamil Literature

K. V. Ramakrishna Rao, B.Sc., M.A., A. M. I. E., C. Eng (I), B.L.,

1. **Introduction:** Roop Kanwar's sati has created a great furore among the historians and scholars in recent times. Their reactions varied from the condemnations of such obscurantist practices to writing books giving historical background and origin of sati. The Greek, Roman and Scythian origins have been attributed, as it has great impact on the psyche of women even today in northern India.

1.1. **Widow burning was prevalent among all the ancient civilizations:** It has been argued by them that sati, now popularly known and understood as the practice of widow-burning did not originate from the ancient Indians, as it is commonly believed and propagated, but had roots in the ancient Egypt, Greek, and other European civilizations. It was among the Gauls, the Goths, the Norwegians, the Celts, the Slavs and the Tharcians. In Egypt, the processions of a king, Pharaoh were buried along with him or a pyramid built over his body, while in Greece women entered into the pyres of their dead husbands. Similar pyre sacrifices were prevalent among almost all ethnic groups of Europe. In China, if a widow killed herself in order to follow her dead husband to heaven, her corpse was taken out in a great procession¹. Col. James Tod mentions that Female immolation originated with the Sun-worshipping Saivas and was common to all those nations who adored this as the most splendid object of the visible creation².

1.2. **Sati might have entered through the Kushanas:** Dr. Panduranga Vaman Kane, the author of the 'History of Dharmasastras' has suggested that the practice might have been brought into India by Kushanas. Max Mueller has also alluded to this in his work, 'The History of ancient Sanskrit literature'. At the time of the great controversy that raged during the legal prohibition of the sati by William Bentick, it was argued that the funeral hymn in Rigveda refers to widows ascending the funeral pyre. The case, however, would be rendered plausible only by fraudulently changing the last word of the stanza from 'agre' to 'agneh'³. But, the verse in question refers to women with their husbands living coming forward to anoint corpse before it was consigned to flames and contains no reference whatsoever to any widow immolating herself on her husbands' funeral pyre⁴. And the current literature that has flooded the shelves of libraries also proceed on the same lines interpreting the verses of Vedas, Dharmasastras, Epics and Puranas, and concluding that the practice developed in the early centuries of the Current Era and spread to north to the south in the tenth century. But, surprisingly in the ancient Tamil literature, there are many references about sati, though its name as such is not mentioned. From such references, the possible origin of it from the south or the prevalence of such practice in the ancient period of Tamils, even before its advent in the north is worth considering and thus studied in this paper.

2. About the word 'Sati': The word 'Sati' as such is not used, though the practice was there in the ancient period of the Tamils. **Tippaydal** (jumping into flames), **Tikkulittal** (taking bath in flames) and **Udankattai erudal** (entering into pyre along with the dead husband) are the expressions used. Originally, the word 'sati' had a wider meaning as 'your honour' or 'your ladyship' ('bhavati', in Sanskrit) used to address ladies. It also meant a good and virtuous woman and a loyal wife. But, only two hundred years ago, under the impact of missionary polemics, the word acquired the connotation of 'faithful widow who burns herself with her husband's corpse', a meaning, which Moirer Williams gives in his Sanskrit-English dictionary. On the same argument, he defines 'Satitva' as 'wifely fidelity' (especially as evinced by cremation with a husband's corpse). He quotes H. H. Wilson as authority in his first edition in marginal note for this definition. Now the word has been changing from virtuous woman to a loyal wife to a faithful widow burning herself on the funeral pyre of her husband to widow burning. The European conception of 'suttee' and its evolved understanding have led the leftist oriented intelligentsia to arrive at the present day connotation. But, in the ancient Tamil literature, the expressions **Tippaydal**, **Tikulittal** and **Udankattai erudal** denote only the voluntary self-immolation by the virtuous wife and it can be understood from the following discussion. Before that, the social and marital background of the ancient Tamils should be understood.

3. Kalaviyal and Karpial: From the ancient extant Tamil work Tolkappiyam, the **Kalaviyal** (order and conduct of clandestine love) and **Karpial** (order and conduct of open married life) are known. When Kalaviyal created many sociological problems or rather when it was misused and abused by men, **Karanams** or sacraments were introduced to discipline the erred men, Karpial was expounded and Karpu extolled. Karpu, the highest and exalted virtue of women, generally translated as chastity, was considered as one of the five virtuous ornaments of Tamil women. With the introduction of sacrament of marriage and connected rituals and rites, marital life was established, defined and accepted.

3.1. Two forms of union of man and woman and related practices: In ancient times, there were two forms of union of man and woman among Tamils – Kalavu and Karpu i.e, union in secrecy and union in open (as explained). But, Tolkappiyar under **Agattinai** grouped different forms of love and union and they are **kakkilai**, **aintinai** and **peruntinai**. Kakkilai or **orutalaikamam** was one sided love and there were three forms under this category.

- ⇔ A lover approaches an immature (pedai) or matured (perumpedai) girl to express his love.
- ⇔ The lovers are equally anxious for union, but postponed.
- ⇔ Kollerukodal or Erukodal is marrying off the girl to the person who wins down a rude bull.

The second group aintinai (Five Tinas) corresponds to the five natural divisions of land, i.e, **kurinji**, **neydal**, **mullai**, **palai** and **marudam**. The third group **peruntinai** deals with unequal and abnormal love matches, union of different varieties and their evil consequences. The last category was of violent nature

leading to ***madalerudhal*** (riding on Palmyra branch for a horse), ***varaippaydal*** (giving up life for marriage) and other peculiar practices. In any case, these violent methods adopted and adapted by men only to rouse sympathetic feelings to compensate their ugly passions and ultimately giving up their lives.

3.2. Karpiyal or desired / arranged marriage: Karpiyal is definitely a form of marriage arranged by the parents of lovers and celebrated with ceremonies and rites. Perhaps, to overcome the problems of Kalaviyal, Karpiyal was developed to regulate love and union of man and woman. As there was degradation, as is evident from the verse of Tolkappiyam, the learned men had to introduce more sacraments to impose greater moral and social binding in the marital life.

3.3. Karpu was the marrying off the girl with ceremonies to a man of status acceptable to the parents of both sides (Tolkappiyam, Karpiyal.142). In cases, even where elopement took place the ceremonial union or karanam was effected (143). This karanams or the specific wedding ceremony was once common and indispensable to the members of four groups of the society (144). But, after the appearance of falsehood and immorality, Iyer introduced karanam i.e, the most elaborate ceremonies of marriage (145). These karanams imposed stringent restrictions on the marital life of men and women. Ettuttogai and Pattppattu reflect the same picture of social life consistent with Tolkappiyam. Though, Tirukkural is considered as a post-Sangam period work, it closely embraces Tolkappiyam in principle. It not only glorifies the social acceptance of one-man one-woman concept of marriage, but also the virtue of chastity.

3.4. The belief in karma and rebirth: Ancient Tamils had belief in karma and rebirth (Puram.27, 214, 236, 240). Then, the belief that a wife would have the same husband even in the forthcoming births also took deep root in the minds of women. It was taught to the women that 'husband is everything for a woman and she should worship him as a God'. Although, 'nothing is permanent' concept is stressed, at the same time, the possessive nature of husband and wife was also asserted. Though there was a practice prevalent among men to have more wives, but at the same time living with a single wife was practiced as good and accepted quality of society (Puram.71, 73, 245). Similarly, husband was considered as the sole partner, protector, mentor and even God for a wife. The virtuous women were even prepared to sacrifice their body, wealth and soul for the sake of their husbands. Many verses were explicitly point out that their hair of a woman should only be touched by her husband and not by others⁵. Thus belief led to the shaving off hair, after the death of her husband as a part of kaimmai nonbu (penance of widowhood), if a woman did not want to perform sati. Wife was made to take part in each and every aspect of the life of her husband and she developed an attitude that she could not live without him. The concepts of karma, rebirth and having the same husband in the next birth might have encouraged women to become sati. The cruel practice of kaimmai nonbu was described in many places⁶. This includes shaving off of hair, removal of bangles and other ornaments, eating tasteless food prepared with a kind of low quality rice mixed

with tamarind, bathing in cold water and sleeping on grass spread on the floor. And there are references in Purananuru describing how women prefer to die along with their husbands than to follow kaimmai nonbu. Therefore, it is evident that the concepts of karma and rebirth, cruelty of kaimmai nonbu and having the same husband in the next birth compelled women to perform sati. Now, the references about the incidences of 'sati' are discussed specifically.

4. Tolkappiyam: Tolkappiyar makes a specific reference about a virtuous wife entering into flames of the funeral pyre of her husband, when he explains about 'tabudara' situation and 'tabada' situation. The former was the situation of a man who lost his wife and the latter that of a woman who lost her husband⁷. In another place, he describes as to how the wife of a warrior died hugging his body on the battle field i.e, she gave up her life by embracing his head. This is known as 'kondon talaiyodu mudinda nilai' i.e, the situation where a wife gives up her life with the head of her dead husband. In Ramayana, we find that Mandodari died with her husband Ravana on the battle field.

5. Purananuru: It gives more details about sati. The poem 62 mentions hoe Seraman Kudakko Nedunjeraladhan and Chozhan Verpakradakkaip Peruvirakilli fought a war with each other because of their imperialistic ambition to conquer other's territory and died on the battle field. Their wives also died along with them, as they did not want to follow kaimmai nonbu. Eating green herbs and taking cold water bath are mentioned here as part of the procedure of kaimmai. The poet Kazhattalaiyar has described the event.

5.1. The verse 240 describes about the cremation of Ay Andiran and the death of his wives along with him. The poem specifically mentions that the bodies were burnt and his women went to **devaloka** – the world of gods, along with him.

5.2. The verses 245 and 247 detail about the sati of Perungopendu. She, the wife of Butappandiyan, was a learned lady with the knowledge of politics and justice. After the death of her husband, as there was no royal member to rule, the scholars and others advised her to take over the kingdom for the welfare of the people. But, without her husband, she did not want to live. She compared the living, following kaimmai nonbu with the unbroken bonded life with her husband in the next life and decided to give up her life. So she addressed the scholars like this; "Oh the learned scholars! You advice me not to die along with my husband. But, I am not a woman like one who follows kaimmai by taking a tasteless food prepared with low quality rice (like the seeds of cucumber whose surface resembles the back of a squirrel) and gingely paste but without ghee and sleeping without bed. I am prepared to take a different bed in the crematory grounds. For me, the pond with blossomed lotus and the fire with flames are one and the same". Madurai Peralavayar, a poet was present, when she entered into the flames. That scene created an indelible impression on his mind, which resulted in the form of a poem. The place where she entered into fire was before the temple of Kadukizhal in the crematory grounds. The fire was set up ready for her with

flames glowing. She came there, after taking bath with her drenched hair, went around the pyre and jumped into it, thinking only her husband.

5.3. The poem 256 is sung by an anonymous female poet. She lost her husband in a battle. As she did not want to live without her husband, she addressed the Potter: “Oh, Potter, I came here with husband just like a lizard which holds tight to the potter’s wheel even though it rotates around the axle. But, now as I have lost him, kindly manufacture a bigger tazhi, so that it can accommodate me along with him”. This implies that besides dying on the pyre along with husband or jumping into fire like Perungopendu, the practice of burying along with dead husband might have also prevalent among the ancient Tamils.

5.4 The poem 78 describes how the seven kings who opposed Talaiyalangalattu Ceru Venra Pandiyan Nedunjezhiyan were got defeated and their wives, who were having respectable ornaments, died with the shame. Here, it is really intriguing as to why their wives should die, just because they were defeated in the battle field. The poet might have implied that they might have been killed and their wives performed sati along with them in the battle field.

5.5. Marokkattu Pasalaiyar has sung the poem 280, which gives the following details: “A wife of a fallen hero says to the poet that without her husband, the Panars (singers), Viraliyars (dancers) and others may not be able to live. I do not know the fate of your lives. Your existence may be rare and uncertain without him, but my existence will be more rare and uncertain without him”. In other words, she implies that she will not be alive without her husband, but as her husband was already killed in the battle and she knows the fact, according to the tradition prevailed, she might have decided to give up her life along with her husband and she would have implied this indirectly in comparing with the life of singers and dancers.

6. Kuruntogai: The verse 69 narrates how a monkey commits suicide voluntarily after making necessary arrangements for her children with her relatives, as she does not want to follow kaimmai! Actually, here the poet might have attributed the sati performed by some woman to the dying of a monkey, as a doubt arises as to whether a monkey actually sacrificed her life avoiding kaimmai! It has been clearly mentioned that the women with children need not have performed sati. Therefore, the concept of performing sati with children is against the tradition of ancient Tamils. Hence, it is evident that the poet has mentioned about sati of some women or he has clearly picturised the prevalence of the practice of sati during his period.

7. Silappadikaram and Manimekhalai: Imayavaramban Nedunjeraladhan fought a war with the contemporary Chola king, in which, both the monarchs lost their lives and their queens performed sati. Later, we find that the mother of Senguttuvan performs sati at the time of the death of her husband. Senguttuvan leads an expedition to the Himalayas to bring a stone for making an image of her mother and another for the goddess of chastity⁸. Though Toklappiyar mentions

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about sati and planting of virakkals (hero stones) in memory of fallen heroes and the six stages involved in planting, the latter-day practice of raising a cenotaph for the sati called satikal, maha satikal or mastikal is not mentioned in the ancient Tamil literature.

7.1. The six stages⁹ involved in planting virakkal were –

- ⇔ to find out the appropriate stone,
- ⇔ to fix an auspicious time for carving out and inscribing,
- ⇔ to get the stone bathed in sacred waters,
- ⇔ to plant in the place already fixed and
- ⇔ to celebrate it as a deity.

As Senguttuvan brought a stone and built a place of worship for the goddess of chastity, similar practice might have also been followed for the women who performed sati and such stones might have been known as saktikals and images as that of goddess of chastity.

7.2. In Manimekhalai¹⁰, we find the interesting episodes of Adhirai performing sati, when she came to know that her husband was killed in ship wreckage. Without her husband, she could not think of living, so she decided to raise fire and die by entering into it. She explained her position to the learned. Then, after having cold water bath, dressed her with new cloths, adorned her hair with fragrant flowers and applied sandal paste on her, she came to the fire which was kept ready for her. She saw surrounding people of the city and the flames glowing. Forgetting even herself, concentrating on her husband and praying to fire god requesting him to make her to reach her husband, she jumped into the fire. The on looking people closed their eyes with anguish and sorrow. But, lo! The moment, she jumped the sandal paste on her did not dry, the flowers did not get blackened and the new dress did get affected. She appeared like Lakshmi who seated on the lotus. Though the historians are divided about the date of Silappadikaram and Manimekhalai, they cannot deny the fact that the prevalence of sati at the time of composing of the epics or during the period of the characters depicted.

8. Does Tirukkural make reference to Sati? It has already been mentioned that Tiruvalluvar has followed Tolkappiyar and not made any departure from the treatment of his subject. He has largely followed him under two main divisions of Kamattuppal and Kalavu and Karpu. This confirms that in his time, the customs has not changed and the institutions remained almost the same as that of the ancient period of the Tamils. It is well known that Tiruvalluvar does not mention about anything and everything in the same place, but in various places with implied meaning. And if he repeats any point in the same place or at different place, it is not actually he repeats, but implies another meaning. With the background of his couplets on kalavu and karpu reading the chapter Manam

(Honour) with Vazhkkai Tunai nalam (Benefits of having a wife with good qualities), we can find the consistency of the subject dealt with.

8.1. Under the chapter 'Honour' (Manam), he explains about the importance of it and its effect on society. He says that the degraded or deviated path of the people of respected family is just like the falling of hair from the head (964). Again, in a following couplet (969), he asserts that the people who respect honour as great virtue in their life would die for its sake, just like kavariman (a kind of deer) that dies immediately, even a single hair is removed from her body. First, he compares the degraded life with the hair removed from the head and then, dying for honour with that of kavariman. In the present context, the removal of hair is very significant, as it directly points to kaimmai nonbu. And kaimmai was prescribed to women, if they did not want to or they were not in a position to perform sati.

8.2. In the chapter, "The virtue of an ideal wife", he defines that the ideal wife is one who protects her chastity without any blemish, her husband, the established name and fame and follows the above qualities strictly (56). And in the very following couplet, he asks "What is the use of prison and other safety measures to protect the women by their counterparts, if the women cannot protect themselves?" (57). That is, he clearly implies that the self-efforts or voluntary actions to safeguard themselves are the real safety measures for protecting their respect, honour and chastity. This, he talks about the qualities of women on the earth. But, suddenly, in the following couplet (58), he tells about the place of women getting in heaven after death as follows: "If the woman has honour of worshipping her husband in the present life, she will have greater honour even in the world of gods with their blessings". So, if a woman does not have the honour of worshipping her husband in the present life, what is her position in heavens? Suppose, if she losses her husband, what she can do? So, here, definitely, consistent with the ancient Tamil tradition, he implies that virtuous women may have to perform sati, if her husband dies, so that she can have the honour in heavens. As Valluvar lived after Tolkappiyar, definitely, he must have known the prevailing practices of Tamizhagam of his times. As he used to imply many other aspects also in an indirect way, it is evident that Valluvar has referred to sati indirectly, but, strictly in the context of ancient social life of Tamils.

8.3. The reading of ancient Tamil literature gives a picture of the following three types of chaste women:

- ♂ Those who die immediately the moment their husbands die
- ♂ After the death of husbands, those who raise fire and then perform sati and
- ♂ Those who follow kaimmai nonbu without dying.

In fact later, Mamimekhalai talks about these, happening in the case of chaste women (Mani.III:42-47). Kopperundevi, wife of Ariyapadaikadanda Nedunjezhiyan and Perungopendu, wife of Pudapandiyan are examples respectively for the first two categories. About the widows following kaimmai, mention has already been made. This later classification of chaste Tamil women

clearly shows that sati was an accepted custom of the ancient Tamil society. However, nowhere it is mentioned that the sati was performed by force or committed against the will of the women. The cult of goddess of chastity might have been the continuance of the practice of worship of the symbols and carved stone images erected in the memory of women who performed sati. The two expeditions of Senguttuvan were for bringing a stone from the Himalayas first for his mother, who performed sati and then for the goddess of chastity confirm the rise of such cult or slow transformation of sati-worship to pattini-worship. Indeed, Manimekhalai (Chapter.6) gives a very detailed description of the cemetery and crematory grounds called Cakravalakottam in Puhar, where there were many monumental shrines built of burnt bricks of various sizes in long lines over the burials of saints, kings or wives who performed sati along with their husbands with the indications of their caste, ashram, sex and other details.

9. **Conclusion:** The present-day scholars¹¹ who try to trace the origin of sati in India, always resort to start their studies with Rigveda and argue that the practice started only by fraudulently changing the last word of a stanza of the Rigveda from “agre” to “agneh”. At the same time they also argue that Rigveda and Dharmasasras do not ‘prescribe the practice of sati but simply points out the existence of the custom of the living woman lying with their dead husband’. The parts of Puranas belonging to the period 6th to 16th centuries glorify the rite. Nirayasinidhu and Dharmasinidhu which describe the rite belong to 17th century. P. V. Kane contends that several ancient texts ascribed to Paithinasi, Angiras and Ayagrapad could be quoted to prove that self-immolation by widows was in fact absolutely forbidden. None of the Dharmasastras except Vishnu contains any reference to such burning. They also assert that ‘the earliest recorded sati in India in 317 BCE was chronicled by Alexander’s soldiers in Punjab and the latest in 1987 in Deorala’. The practice developed in the early centuries of the current era in the north and spread to the south only in the 10th century. But, all of these scholars have not considered the prevalence of such practice in the south in the same period or perhaps even before the advent of the Christ. Though A. S. Atlekar mentions about the sati of Perungopendu, he throws suspicion over her historicity itself. Though Buddhist literature, Megasthenes and Kautilya do not mention the custom, more importance and cognizance are given to the Greek writers for recording the ‘first sati performed in India’, ignoring the literary evidence of the ancient Tamils. As Kharavela and Adokan inscriptions make specific references about the confederation of Tamil kings, Pandiyas and Cholas, their existence cannot be ignored altogether. Unless coordinated and correlated study numismatics and epigraphic evidences with the literary evidences pointed out is conducted, a complete picture of any historical event or process of ancient India cannot be obtained.

9.1. Now, the majority of scholars and historians accept that the period of Sangam may be restricted to the range 300 BCE to 300 CE with all chronological puzzles. If the writings of the foreigners like Greeks and others have to be accepted by removing chaff from the grains, then the same methodology should be applied to the ancient Tamil literature also. Then only the complete history of

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India can be written, inscriptions and Kingdoms, kings and people can be understood in the right perspective. Therefore, if the prevalence of the practice of sati in the earliest period of the Tamils is taken into account, historians have to consider the following points:

1. whether the practice of sati was a Tamilian origin
2. Whether the practice was borrowed as propounded by some scholars.
3. whether the practice was spread to south from north or otherwise or
4. Whether the practice was independently and simultaneously prevalent at the two ends of the country and spread throughout. After considering perhaps historians may have to rewrite the history as far as sati is concerned, as it has great impact on many aspects of social sciences and particularly in history itself.

Based on the above Tamil literary evidences, it is concluded that –

1. The practice of sati was there since c.500-300 BCE, though the name as such is not found in the Sangam literature.
2. Such practice had neither any religious sanctity-influence nor compulsion supported by any religious literature.
3. That is prevalence of such practice had nothing to do with ‘Aryanization’, as suggested by some scholars and historians.

Notes and References

1. C. H. Tawney, ***Kathasaritsagara***, Vol.I, Terminal Essay on Suttee by Pensei, Appendix – I, pp.255-272.
He pointed out that such practice was there among all the ancient civilizations.
2. Col. James Tod, ***Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan***, Motilal Bararasidas, New Delhi, Vol.II, 1971, p.737.
3. Rigveda, X.18.7.
4. A. S. Atlekar, ***The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization***, Motilal Banarasidas, New Delhi, 1962, p.112.
5. Purananuru – 113, 280; Kuruntogai – 225; Paditruppattu – 44.
6. Puram. 25, 62, 230, 234, 235, 246, 250, 280.
7. Tolkapiyam – Poruladhikaram – Purattitaoyiyal. 79.
8. Silappatikaram – Kandam.25, katchi.11; 160-4; 28 (nadukal), 11:119-121; Kandam.26 (Kalkot), 11, 188-220.
9. Tolkappiyam – Porul.60.
10. Manimekhalai.16.23-24.
11. V. N. Datta, ***Sati: Widow Burning in India***, Manohar Publishers, New Delhi, 1988.
Arvind Sharma (Rd.), ***Sati: Historical and Phenomenological Essays***, Motoilal Banarasidas, New Delhi, 1989.
Sakuntala Narasimhan, ***Sati: A Study of Widow Burning in India***, Viking, New Delhi, 1990.
12. A. S. Atlekar, opt.cit., p.128.